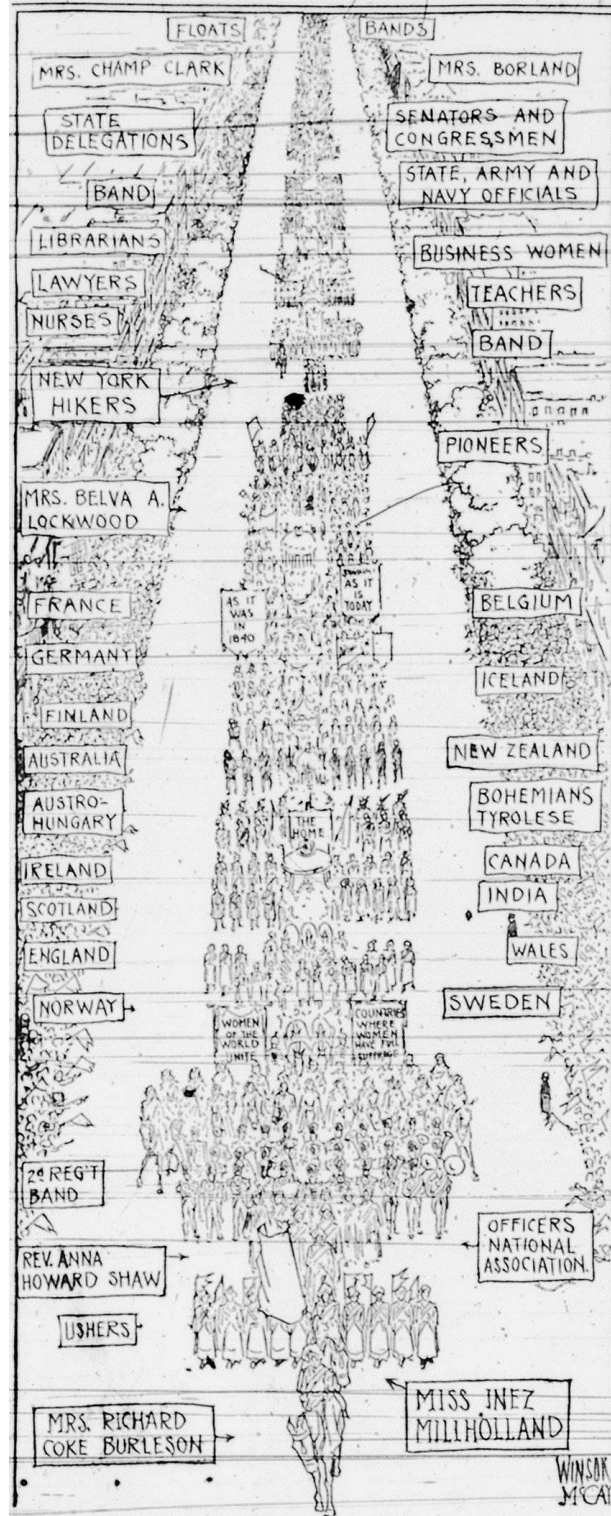


How Thousands of Women Parade To-day at Capital. SUFFRAGE MARCH LINE



IDA AT THE MARCH

Racism in the U.S. women's suffrage movement

A couple of years ago I wrote a little zine called *Heterodoxy to Marie*. Not sure how I got onto the subject, but in looking up Marie Jenney Howe I got pissed off that she didn't have her own Wikipedia article, but was relegated to a short paragraph in her husband's article. Marie was part of a long-running organization of radical women in New York City who called themselves "Heterodoxy." I want to touch on that now, only in order to lead to the Alpha Suffrage Club in Chicago, and another group, the Delta Sigma Theta sorority from Howard, by way of Ida B. Wells.

In one sprawling tentacle of my reading I ended up with descriptions of the 1913 Suffrage March in Washington, D.C. with Inez Mulholland at the head on a white horse and hundreds of women marching behind in fancy sashes and amazing hats. There were contingents of representatives from many U.S. states. The atmosphere in DC at their near daily protests was brutal. People would crowd around and assault the picketers and marchers. My impression is that there was an attempt to create a spectacle of dignity and legitimacy in this march.

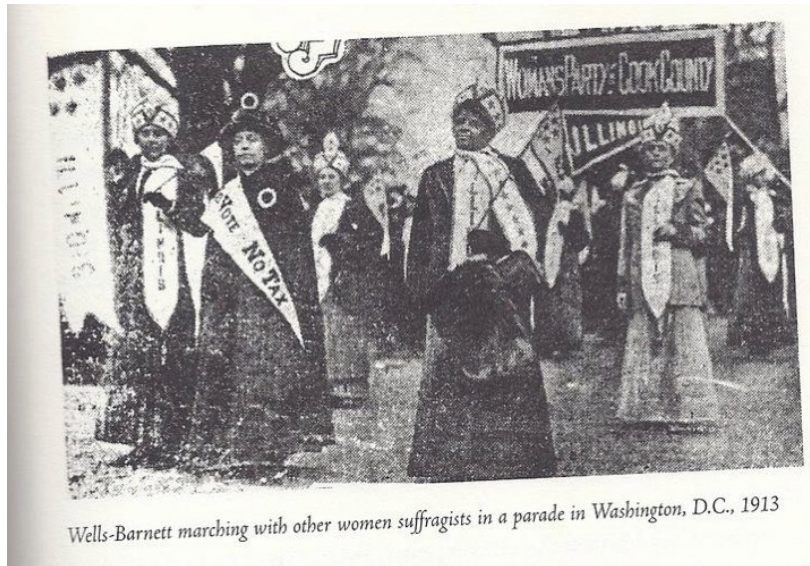
**"One had better die fighting against injustice
than die like a dog or a rat in a trap."**

— Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Part of the story of the march is that Ida B. Wells was there from Chicago, and was told not to march with the white women who were the official delegates from Illinois, but to go to the back of the march.

Wells refused to comply, and sprang out from the crowd during the middle of the March to join the Illinois delegation anyway, flanked by two of her (white) comrades and friends.

This is the photo that shows up to illustrate the story, showing Wells with a starry sash, turban-like starry hat, and flag, marching near another flag that says “Illinois” in front of a banner that reads Women’s Party, Cook County.



That story of Ida at the march varies from source to source, and even varies when told by the same people at different times. I found it a worthy subject of investigation. One telling is that Alice Paul (or “her organization”) found out about Wells’ participation at the last minute, and that some of the southern state delegates objected, saying they’d pull out from the march if Wells was allowed to appear with the Illinois women. Other stories spin it differently, naming various other women in NAWSA who put the black women at the back of the march flanked by white Quaker men for their protection. There are a lot of small variants, and it would take serious research to straighten them out.

It’s lovely to picture Wells bursting into the Illinois delegates. She would have had to struggle through an extremely hostile crowd just to get to the edge of the march. At least a hundred women were hospitalized after the DC march, because of attacks from the angry mob. How did she fight her way through that crowd? How would it feel, I have some inklings of how it would feel, to proudly march with her sash on, in her elegant hat, amidst the banners, knowing the extra armor you would have to wear inside your soul. She is a compelling hero.

I think of how bad ass Wells-Barnett was in general. If you have not read her 1895 book *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States*, you should really give it a try. It’s very grim and horrifying. She also tears into white British suffragist Frances Willard’s racist poisonous remarks on lynching and “dark-faced mobs”... So you can see right in Wells’ work that it’s not like feminist activists in Britain weren’t aware of what was up. You can be all like “oh they were just ‘of their time’...” since we know there were awesome anti racist activists among the super gross white supremacist feminist ones like Willard.

You can see another dimension to all of this if you read some of the propaganda written by Marie Jenney and her fellow Heterodoxy members, including a play called *Telling the Truth at the White House* (1917) in which two white suffragists go to jail and then to court. Their adventure with the law is framed by two drunk black women providing comic relief, and then having the vote condescendingly explained to them. They are presented as incapable of understanding anything about suffrage movement, but agreeing that surely they would trust these nice white ladies to go ahead and vote. This little play is truly, truly vile.

It isn’t alone; if you poke around in the propaganda fiction, plays, and speeches of white suffragists there are many examples where white women point out, mock, and revile the ignorance of black men

and women, as a deliberate counterpoint to white women being denied the vote. It was part of many white suffragists' strategy to appeal to racism.

This filled me with cold fury as I thought of the many African American women who were their contemporaries who were fighting for their rights. It is such a blatant disrespect that they rhetorically make the black women and men disappear from the public debate except as examples of being unworthy of participating in political life. These were their colleagues and fellow activists! If you think to Frederick Douglass's deep involvement and the entire abolition movement's years of being intertwined with suffrage movement across the U.S. and England (look it up... I can't write a dissertation here...) it is such a cruel and repeated slap in the face by the white women, I can't even. Entire enormous organizations of black women in association, who came to nationwide suffrage conferences!

Many feminist organizations used white supremacy as part of their political fight to get the vote for white women. They traded on the currency of white supremacy to scabble for a scrap of power. Like I said, vile.

Have a look at the books *Treasonous Texts* and *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Women Suffrage Movement* for some disturbing food for thought. It isn't about Susan B. Anthony saying one bullshit thing, it's a pattern woven through the entire movement over many years!

Back to Wells and the 1913 March and this small, complicated story. Some stories say Wells fundraised with her black women's org in Chicago, the Alpha Suffrage Club. Some say that 35 or so members of the Alpha Suffrage Club went to DC and marched. (But where? At the back?) I've seen descriptions that say Wells was the only black woman at the march, a lone hero bursting in, refusing to stay (or go at all) to the back of the march, supported and protected by white women friends from her home town. It seemed so unlikely she was

the only black woman in this entire march, so I went looking for other sources.

I read that the National Association of Colored Women sent several delegations to the march, joining the Delta Sigma Theta sorority. I've also seen claims that the Delta Sigma Thetans were the only black women at the march, or that Wells was part of their sorority group, which I don't think was true. In short, history is confusing, and people write terribly incomplete, misleading little summaries of "what happened".

"We have application from a colored woman to march — will Negro women be admitted to the suffrage parade — answer — quick"
Telegram from Chicago to Alice Paul, 4 days before the 1913 March

Another tantalizing detail: the staging area for the black women was separate from the main march's staging area. I can find no description of them marching or their position, and no photos.

If you think of demonstrations or marches you have been part of, try to imagine reconstructing how it was planned, what actually happened in the moment, and so on! Very difficult! A big event happens in many dimensions. Alice Paul didn't "plan" the 1913 march, it was organized by many, many people working together, from different organizations! Others in her organization including the president of NAWSA, Anna Shaw, disagreed with Paul's decision.

"As far as I can see, we must have a white procession, a Negro procession, or no procession at all" —Alice Paul, 1913

To learn more, I recommend the book *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920*. You can get it used online very cheap.

Back to the black sororities of the time. Both the ASC and Delta Sigma Theta are said to have been formed just before the march, in order to support sending its members as a group.

I feel sure that there is more info out there about the Alpha Suffrage Club and its members, and their participation in the 1913 march. The ASC held regular meetings in Bridewell Prison and I believe it included some white women, or at least had some local white suffrage activists as allies. It might take research done locally in Chicago to find out more.

There is more easily available information on the sorority from Howard. The group formed in January 1913, with 22 founding members; going to the march together was their first public act. I enjoyed looking at the photos of the founders. There is an awesome photo of them at <http://www.sopalmbeachdst.com/spbcac/national-history>.



Here are their names: (First Row): Winona Cargile Alexander, Madree Penn White, Wertie Blackwell Weaver, Vashti Turley Murphy, Ethel Cuff Black, Frederica Chase Dodd; (Second Row): Osceola Macarthy Adams, Pauline Oberdorfer Minor, Edna Brown Coleman, Edith Mott Young, Marguerite Young Alexander, Naomi Sewell Richardson, Eliza P. Shippen; (Third Row): Zephyr Chisom Carter, Myra Davis Hemmings, Mamie Reddy Rose, Bertha Pitts Campbell, Florence Letcher Toms, Olive Jones, Jessie McGuire Dent, Jimmie Bugg Middleton, Ethel Carr Watson.

I hope this throws a little perspective on some specific ways the U.S. white women's suffrage movement expressed white supremacy and racism. White women suffragists' oppression by the police and state didn't stop quite a few of them from being horrible racists. So let's not forget that.

A white woman has only one handicap to overcome - that of sex. I have two - both sex and race. ... Colored men have only one - that of race. Colored women are the only group in this country who have two heavy handicaps to overcome, that of race as well as that of sex.

— Mary Church Terrell (1890 speech to NAWSA)

But my other point is that in the story telling and history making about Wells as hero we should not lose sight of the 22 young women from Howard who also marched, and of Mary Church Terrell along with all the women from the National Association of Colored Women and their different delegations, who also marched. Wells was amazing! And she was not alone.

As you tell stories, and report on activism & organizing, watch out for how you make a hero. The mythologizing of how things happen

renders too many of us invisible. We need heroes, but for their heroism to make sense, we need their context.

People came from many countries to march in DC for women's suffrage, and I don't know the details there but it would be neat to find out more. I don't like when a complicated story, even of one incident in one day a hundred years ago, is simplified beyond all possibility.



COLORED WOMEN IN SUFFRAGE PARADE

They Will Have Places in Col-
lege and New York
Divisions

ISSUE IS SQUARELY PUT

Already It Is Said to Have
Caused Dissension in
Ranks.

Washington, March 1.—Colored women students from the Howard University will march in the college division of the suffrage parade under the direction of Miss Elsie Hill, daughter of the Congressman from Connecticut, who is in charge of that division. Colored women will also be in the New York division.

This brings the color question squarely to the issue. The news that the colored women will march has been kept more or less a secret for fear the Southern women affiliated with the parade and the populace of Washington would object to the presence of negro suffragists in the big demonstration.

Rumors of a disagreement between Miss Alice Paul, chairman in charge of the parade, and the National Association prevailed to-night. It seems Miss Paul informed some negro suffragists who wish to march that while the National Association recognizes equal rights for colored women, yet the people of the South might take objection.

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THIS IS IMPORTANT
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